



**Queensland University of Technology**  
Brisbane Australia

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Carter, Danielle & Heim, Caroline L.](#)  
(2015)

Community engagement or community conversation?: Boomtown, a large-scale regional, outdoor community theatrical event.  
*Australasian Drama Studies*, 66(1), pp. 202-224.

This file was downloaded from: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/85038/>

© Copyright 2015 Danielle Carter and Caroline Heim.

**Notice:** *Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source:*

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/research/journals/australasian-drama-studies/issues/issue-66>

**Community Engagement or Community Conversation?: *Boomtown*, a large-scale regional, outdoor community theatrical event.**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 2013, three hundred local members of Gladstone, Queensland erupted into song and dance performing the fraught history of their community harbourside through tug boat ballets, taiko drumming, German bell ringing and BMX bike riding. Over 20,000 people attended the four performances of *Boomtown*, a Queensland Music Festival event. This was the largest regional, outdoor community-engaged musical performance staged in Australia. The narrative moved beyond the dominant, pejorative view of Gladstone as an industrial town to include the community members' sense of purpose and aspirations. It was a celebratory, contentious and ambitious project that sought to disrupt the traditional conventions of performance-making through working in artistically democratic ways.

This article explores the potential for Australian Community Engaged Arts projects such as *Boomtown* to democratically engage community members and co-create culturally meaningful work within a community. Following an introduction to community engagement, the complex processes of finding and co-writing the narrative, casting, and rehearsing *Boomtown* are discussed with reference to artistic director/dramaturge Sean Mee's innovative approaches. *Boomtown* began with and concluded with community conversations. Michel de Certeau argues that "Conversation is a provisional and collective effect of competence in the art of manipulating 'commonplaces' and the inevitability of events in such a way as to make them 'habitable.'"<sup>1</sup> Conversation was embedded in the process of making *Boomtown* and emerged as a collective effect. The stories shared and emphasised in the theatricalised story were based on propitious, meaningful, local stories from lived experiences rather than preconceived, trivial or tokenistic matters, and were underpinned by a consensus formed on what was in the best interests of the majority of community members. *Boomtown* exposed

hidden issues in the community and gave voice to thoughts, feelings and concerns which triggered not just engagement, but honest conversation within the community.

To supplement the research, twenty-four personal interviews were undertaken<sup>2</sup> with those invested in the production from both sides of the community conversation before, during and after the project. These included five local partners, six performers, five creative team members, and six audience members who were interconnected to the project through professional, family and voluntary ties. The interviewees were new, long-term, and middle generation Gladstone residents, and included three representatives (including the mayor) from Gladstone Regional Council, a representative from Gladstone Regional Art Gallery, and a local music teacher. The aim of the interview questions was to gain a breadth and depth of understanding and insight into the extent of community engaged art practice's effects on the community.

### **Community Engaged Arts**

“Community” is a complex, motherhood term that conjures up warm feelings of existing established relationships and is interrelated to a sense of belonging<sup>3</sup>. Essentially, community involves commonality between groups of people and is fundamentally relational. The contemporary understanding of community has been influenced by two historical conflicting senses of community: community as particular and local or universal and the dominant view that “modernity destroys community” calling for community to be restored in a new form.<sup>4</sup> As differences between groups in the globalised world are blurring, Gerard Delanty suggests “wilfully” constructing contemporary communities by practices of communication that prioritise the searching for roots in preference to preserving boundaries constructed between self and others.<sup>5</sup> Community engaged projects such as *Boomtown* attempt to privilege the searching for roots approach through researching, rehearsing and performing communities using local resources in regional Australian towns. This approach is

accommodated by Martin Mulligan et al.'s analytical framework that considers three imbricated characteristics of community: "grounded community", the particular people in specific physical settings; "way-of-life community", the communal attitudes and practices, and "projected community", the perpetual creative processes of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of self-identity and ethics for living.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to community, but more of a slippery term, "engagement" is also centred on relationships. Engagement relies on contact and interconnection to foster involvement and participation. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that all art should be "engagé", - committed -, and emphasise human freedom through the processes of exchange, social interactions and relationships.<sup>7</sup> Community engaged projects can only be fertile sites for genuine exchange to occur if the community story is sensitively and accurately represented and the exchange begins with a conversation.

Community engagement involves interactions between government and citizens for mutual participation in the ambit of policy, program and service decisions<sup>8</sup> and is central to local government's responsibility to improve civic relationships and progress community well-being through democracy.<sup>9</sup> The etymology of "democracy" originates from Greek *demokratia*, meaning "popular government." It is a combination of *demos*, "common people" within a particular district and *kratos*, "rule, strength."<sup>10</sup> The prevailing initiative in Aristotle's terms is the concept of being ruled by the masses, including the underprivileged. The Australian democracy, among other ideals, attempts to create an open society, and strives through this to ultimately augment the well-being of all or the majority of citizens.<sup>11</sup> However, to form a consensus of what is in the community's best interest requires inclusivity and meaningful dialogue based on a genuine commitment to gain understanding and insight into the community so that ideologies, concepts, theories and experiences can be exchanged. Community celebrations and festivals offer a vehicle to enable citizens to participate, to be

heard, and to collectively express. Celebration is vital to community existence and inclusively reaches a broad and diverse population.<sup>12</sup> Sincere interest to involve the community privileges local cultural expression, provides rich representation of the community, and avoids simplistic judgements.

Community engaged arts (CEA) are collaborative ventures between artists and communities intended for inclusive cultural expression, ownership, and direct participation of community members to achieve a sense of belonging and effect positive social change. CEA practices lean towards disenfranchised and marginalised groups.<sup>13</sup> Value is determined by the particular communities. It is, therefore, unnecessary to “beat people over the head” or be affiliated with a movement in order to motivate change.<sup>14</sup>

Australian CEA practice emerged in the 1960s and 1970s during the political and social issues of the Vietnam War, Feminism, and Aboriginal land rights.<sup>15</sup> Sandy Kirby argues earlier influences of the Australian radical political traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which contributed significantly to Australian proletarian culture, provide an historical context for CEA.<sup>16</sup> Certainly CEA originated in opposition to the dominant political and cultural paradigms, and is strongly affiliated with the working class: two enduring themes that continue to influence current CEA practice.

CEA received official government support in 1973 and evolved in the Australia Council of the Arts (Australia Council) through emergent paradigms of art *for*, *with*, and *by* the community. Currently, Community Partnerships supports CEA programs and projects as guided by three principles: to support “activities *by*, *with* and *for* the communities”, culturally energize and strengthen communities, and position highly skilled artists as leaders.<sup>17</sup> The purpose is to expand the CEA network and emphasis capacity building. In providing a brief overview of the history of CEA this article does not attempt to assess grant recipient decisions, but instead considers the impacts of CEA policies on QMF’s *Boomtown*. This

article argues that the cultural performance sphere is the mechanism that can both implement and strengthen democratic practice through celebratory performances. CEA projects provide a platform for community members to self-express, co-create and imagine, and supports and privileges amateur community performers as storytellers.

To create an environment for authentic rather tokenistic representation and co-creation to occur in CEA projects, prominent Australian community arts theatre practitioners Paul Brown, David Watts and Graham Pitts stress the need for sensitive communication with community members and groups. In developing the verbatim theatre production, *Aftershocks* in 1991 with the Newcastle Worker Cultural Action Committee ,Brown demonstrated the sensitivity and integrity required to represent a community. Brown only involved participants who were responsive to the project, privileged the given stories, and had checking processes and mechanisms for the community to maintain control over the work and to receive consistent feedback.<sup>18</sup> These measures retained the humanised personal experiences and simultaneously the universal themes of traumas experienced in disasters echoed beyond the Newcastle region.<sup>19</sup> Although David Watt warns against universalising verbatim theatre to authenticate, he does recognise democratised community theatre making is often loosely based on material derived from oral history (or even present day accounts) through formal or informal interviewing with community members.<sup>20</sup> Pragmatically, Graham Pitts explains that the starting point for working with communities is finding an honourable answer to the question of “Why are we doing this play?”<sup>21</sup> According to Pitts, community members also question “Why are we doing this?” and the practitioner must be able to articulate responses in a language familiar to the community.<sup>22</sup> Questions such as these are imperative in CEA theatre projects to ensure the productions are authentically *by*, *with*, and *for* the community.

### ***Boomtown***

Large-scale regional community projects were introduced in the Queensland Music Festival (QMF) programming policy in 2003 by then Artistic Director Lyndon Terracini, and have endured as a mainstay of the festival. *Boomtown* is the sixth QMF large-scale community engagement project Sean Mee has been involved in as a director/dramaturge. Mee directed the nationally and internationally recognised *Bobcat Dancing* in Mount Isa 2003, *Bobcat Magic* in Mount Isa 2005, *Red Cap* in Mount Isa 2007, *The Road We're On* in Charleville 2009, *Behind the Cane* in Bowen 2011, and *Boomtown* in Gladstone 2013. Over this decade and after each successive production the(QMF) model for creating CEA projects has been ameliorated and refined based on the shortcomings and successes encountered. The principal modifications have been the length of the projects and the community involvement at narrative and performance levels. The original large-scale project, *Bobcat Dancing*, was a six month process based in Brisbane. Now the creative process is a two-year-venture, and the entire production team move into the community for approximately two months prior to the performance to prepare and conduct daily rehearsals. In place of suggesting a narrative to the communities, the intumescence of narrative from community consultations informs the scriptwriting process, and community performers are no longer in supporting roles but main roles. Originally the large-scale projects relied on outside professional performers to guarantee musical excellence. Engaging local young people as lead performers enabled larger community involvement and a re-defining and re-imagining of "excellence." *Boomtown* had no outside professional talent involved and solely engaged local community members. The talent represented a large cross section of the community from primary school aged children to senior citizens.

*Boomtown* was a celebratory cultural work *for, with and by* the regional community of Gladstone. The Gladstone Region is approximately 450 kilometres north of Brisbane and the gateway to the Southern Great Barrier Reef. It has a major industrial sector with a large

transient workforce, and is an affluent area home to approximately 62,000 local people.<sup>23</sup> *Boomtown* was performed nightly from 18 July to 21 July 2013 on the Gladstone Marina foreshore. The 90 minute performance was performed *by* over 300 local performers *with* an aesthetically, theatricalised idiosyncratic representation of Gladstone *for* close to one third of the population of Gladstone over the course of the four nights.

*Boomtown* began with negotiations between QMF executives and Gladstone Regional Council and following this the project was led to the delivery stage by facilitators Sean Mee, Director/Dramaturge, and Marguerite Pepper, Creative Producer. In April 2012 a musical audit was carried out by QMF representatives to locate and collect data on the musical talent within Gladstone. Mee and Pepper then entered the Gladstone community to scope the event and discover local stories in order to build the concept of the show. Pepper was responsible for networking through the community to reach interested partners and manage those relationships. Mee configured the creative component based on the exchanges with the partners. Essentially, Mee sought out a sense of the people, the history, the place, and the landscape in search of an agreed goal or an all-inclusive concept. The starting point for Mee was to consider the question: “What is this community yearning for?”, and initiate a conversation with Gladstone community members by listening to their stories and exploring numerous perspectives. This process disrupts the traditional conventions of art-making and works in artistically democratic ways.

### ***Finding the Story***

*Boomtown* was developed sequentially in six stages: consultation, development, audition, scriptwriting and composition, rehearsals and performance. A sharing of stories initiated the conversations. Firstly, the QMF story was presented to recipients to stimulate curiosity in the community. During these presentations Mee conveyed his uncertainty on the



Gladstone narrative, and transitioned from a skilled director to a novice on Gladstone. At this point the recipients transferred to knowledgeable experts on their community and shared their stories and experiences about Gladstone. The reciprocity of sharing stories sparked the community's interest to engage with the project and guided Mee and Pepper in determining the level of enthusiasm. From the repository of collected stories, the "yearnings" of the tellers were delineated and then corroborated for authenticity in the community. Mee explained:

all the consultation, and all the understanding of Gladstone, and all that the people of Gladstone contributed is bound up by just that one idea that it has to be thematically resonant. There is a thematic narrative that's at work and it has to be valid. So it is all bound up just in that one simple concept: an enormous amount of work just to fulfil that parameter.

Through this process it was understood that the Gladstone community was fractured, suffering from transience, and the townspeople lacked a rich, deep knowledge of Gladstone's history. Fittingly, the theatrical story reflected new images of Gladstone's past to the current community. Skilful negotiation ensured congruence between the townspeople's stories and the community story presented on stage, abrogating potential problems of narrative ownership. Consequently, the theatrical story affected a wide range of community members, strengthening their sense of belonging, identity and continuity. Audience member Paulette, consulted as the local historian, was astonished at the historic references in the performance:

I am amazed at how much they picked up from talking to me. While watching the production I could recognize many things that we spoke about. I think the essence of what has happened in Gladstone was encapsulated perfectly in the story.

The *Boomtown* narrative did not overlook Gladstone's "bad reputation as an industrial town", as stated by Michael a long-term Gladstone resident. This took Michael by surprise. It was assumed that frivolous "enthusiasm for Gladstone" would be represented on stage: "I didn't expect it to be about a young boy [...] in the story hating the town and then growing to

accept it as the play went on [...] I found that was very interesting, [...] different.” The cast and audience members interviewed could relate, on various levels, to the pessimism directed at Gladstone. The pejorative view of Gladstone in the narrative was juxtaposed with a discourse on the importance of family. The portrayal of a family unit, where familial ties in the story were reinforced, defied, provoked, humoured, challenged and deepened, privileged the importance of family and its close association with home. The significance of family universally resonated as an authentic experience for the townspeople. A middle generation audience member, Wendy, identified with the story’s discourse on family: “Gladstone is about family [...] and the story is about that basically.” Performer, Brent, argued that outsiders often have a misconception of Gladstone, when in fact it is a community where “you can raise a family and make a really good living, but [...] it is not all about the work.” Brent stressed that the main character George, who was cynical of Gladstone, “probably moved to Gladstone already with a negative attitude towards coming here and that’s what it really comes down to.” The thorough process of finding the story ensured the theatricalised story echoed community members’ stories – authentic stories, fragmented stories, resounding stories – stories impelled by the Gladstone populace illuminating their sentiments, and their indifference.

### ***Developing the story***

*Boomtown* was developed as Mee and Pepper occupied the liminal space between government and community and carried out the responsibilities of building consensus on the concept of the performance. The first point of engagement with Council was followed by major research with the whole of the community: seeking out and connecting with individuals and organisations. The invested Council were dependent on a successful event. Cale, a council representative, was impressed with the process extending beyond council “to tell them how things are”, and explained that Mee and Pepper “tested” received knowledge

with other community members to form a deep understanding of “what Gladstone is all about.” Mayor Gail Sellers, however, identified the process as selective: they “glean every bit of knowledge they can, and then choose what they want for the production.” The leading facilitators need skilful, integrity of practice to assure story authenticity enables natural, active involvement from community members, and balances with the needs of the council.

The community hierarchy and politics needed to be handled sensitively at group and individual levels. A large degree of diplomacy was required for Gladstone’s “possessive” ballet schools, as co-operative participation of the dance students from differing schools was somewhat problematic. A creative team member explained “we didn’t want to tread on toes” by teaching the students a different curriculum. The tactic to progress forward involved complimenting the “fantastic discipline and training” of the ballet dancers during meetings with the teachers, and conversations about channelling these skills into a different “mechanical” form of dance.

While the platform of community engaged cultural performance permits the blurring of the literal and fantasy, the initial step in the concept development was to empathically listen to what the community were saying, and subsequently integrate the layer of the fantastical. The process of theatricalising lived experiences opened up the possibilities of disclosing images outside the limits of reality to meaningfully create value in the present, by the wider community’s affective enjoyment of experiencing the performance. In attempting to find the essence of direct experiences, a deep, reachable work of art was designed, where “life grasps life”<sup>24</sup>, that is, the performance is both object and subject of sociocultural life. The Gladstone public were asked to grapple with and relate to the idiosyncrasies of Gladstone community life. The story that emerged centred on the concept of a teenager hating Gladstone, exploiting connotations of Gladstone’s past, with themes of transition and reconciliation woven throughout. For inclusivity, the structure deliberately appropriated

popular culture – *Alice in Wonderland*, a young person going on an imaginative, transformative journey.

### ***The Invitation***

Gareth White discusses four different invitations that are extended to audiences to participate in theatrical events.<sup>25</sup> The invitation proffered to the audience community of Gladstone can be seen as one of White's overt invitations, where community members were invited to participate by celebrating and re-enacting their history and their struggles in particular roles. It was an open, transparent and inclusive invitation to participate in a celebration of Gladstone. The concept of celebration was a pervasive theme that coloured every aspect of the event from the invitation to the production. Joy and unity of collective cultural expression was marked in communications of the vision, scale and purpose of the project. This clear demarcation of celebration appealed to townspeople's connection to Gladstone and ignited their interest in the project.

The transition into the audition phase leveraged the musical audit previously conducted and occurred once the concept was fully-fledged and agreed upon by key partners. The celebration began during the auditions in extending invitations to local performers. Parents Cindi and Anna, who originally attended auditions as guardians to their children, were inspired during the course of the audition process to participate in the project - on varying levels - themselves. As Cindi described, the audition "right from the start [was] instilling that excitement to be part of something" and Anna reiterated, "as soon as we came in it was very much 'oh we are so excited that you are here.'"

Collaboratively, the *Boomtown* creative team (Marguerite Pepper, Sean Mee, David Burton and Scott Saunders) appraised the musical and acting capabilities of the community performers, and with the exception of a singer songwriter everyone auditioned was

accommodated into the show. The creative team understood the performer's commitment to the project was bounded by external conditions and accommodated personal circumstances to develop suitable roles. Brent had family responsibilities limiting his capacity to commit to heavy rehearsals. Brent appreciated the "flexible" nature of crafting the roles to suit his personal situation. The appraisal involved matching actualities with perceptions and ascertaining a desirable fit for the performer and the production. The process inverted traditional casting to build and sculpt the entire production around the performer's specifications and meet the community at their level of need.

The particulars of the show – the music, lyrics and script – were based on the devised concept, audition outcomes and further consultation for participant agreement. In this way, the show was customised to the performer's ideal potential. This level of synthesis was consummated in the plasticity of the scriptwriting process and music composition undertaken by David Burton and Scott Saunders respectively. The purpose-written script gave consideration to the character types and the size of the roles the discovered local talent could adopt in the story. This mammoth task involved simultaneously building and unravelling the "great big tetras puzzle", as described by a creative team member, through the continual swapping of cast members into possible roles and brainstorming ideas to discover the most apposite way to tell the "Gladstone story." The performer's character roles were closely aligned to their personal characteristics which worked to adequately challenge each performer's perception of self and enhance and support their individual development of publicly speaking and singing on stage. One performer, Jack, who was initially concerned about fulfilling the acting requirements, felt reassured that the role was devised from his "own characteristics."

The show was devised with performer's musical abilities and limitations taken into account, and the view to nurture their talents throughout the rehearsals and performance. A

creative team member explained, “we want to make the show about the community, about their abilities and talents and skills and just extend them to a different place.” The “extension” was ultimately what the performers valued from their experience. Stretching people up to the next level of performance to provide a worthwhile experience required several layers of sensitivity, trust and negotiation at every stage in the process. Many conversations took place between locals and the creative team. Cindi noted the audition included much dialogue and instilled a sense of excitement by emphasising involvement in “new works” created from, and forming a part of “your own history.”

The transition into rehearsals involved a community presentation – a work-in-progress viewing – to update the partners on the current purview of the production and to gain their consent to progress forward. Cale noticed the community was “hanging on every word” of the presentation, which increased their confidence in the project. The series of rehearsals occurred in different locations with various creative supervisors. These fragmented rehearsals were incrementally built and progressed over the course of months towards larger run-throughs to piece the performance text together. The performance culture interfaced with the idiosyncratic cultures of the diverse participants to create a unique celebratory expression of Gladstone.

The rehearsal process contained three distinct phases: creation, maintenance and refinement. The creation phase involved Mee establishing trust, minimising tension, building confidence and supporting performers. Rather than placing pressure on the performers, commitment and engagement was sought by establishing their authentic ownership of the story and, therefore, authority to tell the story. The invitation was broadened by creating a convivial, safe rehearsal space to allow performers to engage in experimentation, and valuing their solutions to overcoming obstacles. This practice of co-creation developed reciprocity of trust between the creative team and performers, and reduced tensions with performers who

felt their voices and creativity were privileged in the making of *Boomtown*. Essentially, the rehearsal space was the fertile ground for accepting new possibilities that led to re-writes, re-compositions, and re-adjustments.

Although there was constant negotiation between performer's contributions and the pre-existing ideas from the creatives, a team member argued that Mee was "never dismissive, never rejects, always extends upon offers that are given [by the performers. He] has an ability to lead but never with a tight grip." The care of the creative team to connect with the performers and build their courage and confidence was greatly appreciated. Performer, Hayley, who was initially struggling, stated the creative team "made it a lot easier. I didn't think that I could do it [...] and now I can [...] [and] they knew that I could." Jack reflected that Mee guided his performance by asking "what would you do in this situation?" and emphasised that the rehearsals had a "great atmosphere [that] feels like home." Similarly other performers spoke of receiving support to overcome self-doubt and fear of performing. Through co-creation and privileging individual perspectives, the performers were encouraged by Mee to explore a plethora of expressions and interpretations of the characters as opposed to finding the "one correct way." Their sense of entitlement to perform in front of an audience was cultivated as Cindi stated,

absolutely everyone received a gift of inspiration and a 'you can do it' attitude, taking them out of their comfort zones, taking them away from their own expectations and giving them someone else's expectations, and then the realisation, 'yes we can do this, I did that' and the pride.

This is a poignant example of the efficacy of facilitation.<sup>26</sup> Rather than traditionally directing, Mee facilitated the process empowering the performers to own the performance text.

Creation transitioned to maintenance through "a long process of building trust, making [performers] feel good about themselves, and supporting them" as Pepper explained.

Performers perceived these often lengthy rehearsal periods as value-laden learning experiences. One performer, Clyde, noted the voluntary involvement was compensated by the speculated cost of the educational experience.

At the progression into cohesive rehearsals there was an inversion of ownership of the performance text; a tacit yet consensual “hand-over” from the creatives to the community. This delivery process transpired successfully because the work was purposefully designed for the performer. As Pepper argued, “Ownership of the story [...] happens because it is theirs.” As the performers stepped forward, the creative team retreated, stepping backwards, allowing the performance to belong to the community. This important and significant moment not only empowered the performers, but also firmly established the ownership of the story within the community. Interestingly, this transference of performance text from director to performers occurs much later (on opening night) in conventional theatre-making.

### ***Performing the Story***

The performance reflected Mulligan et al’s three multilayers of community. *Boomtown* was an affirmation of the focal layer of “grounded community” specific to the tangible setting of Gladstone and the embodiment of the people. The site specific work occurred on a multilevel purpose built stage at the Gladstone Marina Park foreshore, and effused into the surrounding harbour and parklands in attribution and approbation of the natural scenery of Gladstone. The expansive, evocative setting was juxtaposed by the industrial-styled stage to reflect the landscape of Gladstone. Similarly, the performance was infused with the layer of “way-of-life community”, particularly by appropriation of the common disregard and cynical attitude held towards Gladstone portrayed in the angst of the main character, George. The production also reflected Delanty’s deterritorialised, universal themes of “searching for roots” to belong and be accepted, to find a sense of home. These effectively political ideas permeated the gamut of existential conditions and interstices of



*Boomtown*. Whilst apparent in the narrative of George's experience of displacement, thematically these community ideals reverberated through the "way-of-life" of the transient industry workers, the "hi-viz zombies," with their scant regard for the depth of history and sentiment in Gladstone. These notions of belonging and connectedness to place crystallised in the beauty of the Indigenous scene, a song in native language sung to uplift the historic shackles and offer integrated peace. The ephemeral nature of the performance with the audience uniting in place and time to engage in the work was in itself an active construction of community: Mulligan et al's "projected community." Furthermore, *Boomtown* attempted to broaden the projections of Gladstone as an industrial hub community by celebrating its diverse cultural elements. The structure created by the QMF team for finding, developing and performing the story was to ensure participation and co-creation could occur at both a narrative and performative level and entry into the project was not guarded by cultural gatekeepers.

### ***The Encounter***

In conventional theatre, the encounter between the theatrical event and the audience occurs at the first performance. For Erving Goffman, an encounter occurs when "one given set of individuals" are in the "continuous presence" of another group of individuals<sup>27</sup> and the groups influence each others' actions. In *Boomtown* this encounter began with the first conversation held between Mee, Pepper and council members long before the first performance. Encounters occurred throughout the event with partners, performers and audience members to co-author and co-create the production.

Audiences were delighted by the creative expression of the historic and distinctive elements of Gladstone. Their comments were dominated by Jill Dolan's utopian performatives<sup>28</sup> and reflections on their community. Paulette explained, "The part that

brought tears to my eyes was the Kookaburra song [...] the kookaburra shells, and what they meant to locals. The scene was well constructed, was beautifully sung and enacted.” The “tug boat ballet” was an epic moment in the performance, when two humanised tug boats danced in sequence and time and connected in an embrace to pirouette together. The ballet expressed the community’s passion for the Harbour and blurred the line between art and industry. This fusion was made possible by the creative team’s convergence with the community through conversations, an exploration of Certeau’s "commonplaces" to find the "habitable."<sup>29</sup> Audience member Len viewed it as a world-first masterpiece, a sentiment most audience members echoed:

How those pilots were able to manoeuvre those vessels, it actually made it look like the tugs were in love. It really was just so beautiful to watch, the choreography was fantastic.

For Genevieve, a resident of seven years, *Boomtown* broadened her “projections” of Gladstone, “It was nice to learn I live in a place with a strong cultural atmosphere; I had never really thought of Gladstone that way before, so it was exciting.” Genevieve continued:

In Boomtown we are seeing [...] ordinary people standing on stage, yet you could just as easily be in the audience at the Lyric Theatre. The male lead is that good and he’s a jolly boilermaker!

Encounters with performers often effected growth of some kind. School teacher Anna witnessed a year ten male student’s behaviour change from being disinterested and disruptive to enthusiasm for the project, taking on a leadership role as a “Zombie captain.” Anna explained, “in the arts you may not get everybody, but every now and then you just get that one kid and to see him having just thrived through the process and taking on that leadership it is very exciting.” The prolonged encounter was also appreciated by Genevieve, the grandmother of a female child performer in a featured role:

*Boomtown* has just changed her life [...] she has always been a performer and this has given her the opportunity to experience the real thing [...] she just loves it, she has had so much positive reinforcement from Marguerite and Sean in particular [...]. What a fabulous opportunity for her out in the bush.

One of the primary purposes in staging *Boomtown* was for the community to engage in “real dialogue and collaboration.”<sup>30</sup> Arlene Goldbard’s warns, however, of creating a superficial unity and vague consensus over a community’s contentious issues. *Boomtown* did not ignore contentious issues or employ a didactic narrative, it aimed to unify the community rather than “beat people over the head” with one side of the argument. This position illustrated real integration of industry with the community, as Cindi explained:

It took away that boundary [line] with inorganic machinery. [...] Suddenly industry was a little bit closer to the community. [...] There was a realisation, well, maybe industry does care for us. [...] It was that one moment in time when industry is not a big money generator and job creator, it actually became part of us.

To ensure that *Boomtown* inclusively represented the people of Gladstone, the engagement strategies of sharing and developing stories, the invitation to participate in a celebration and the aesthetics of engagement hinged on designing the production *for* the community, collaborating *with* the community, and enabling performances *by* the community. This began with and ended with honest, and sometimes, difficult conversations.

### ***Continued conversations***

Although the design of the project was undertaken with great care and consideration for the entering and exiting of the community, whether the Gladstone Regional Council will be able to continue with the positive outcomes from *Boomtown* is yet to be seen. Council representative, Michael hoped to capitalise on the success of *Boomtown* and continue the relationship with the corporate and commercial sectors to support further cultural events. In

what Matthew Reason calls the “memorial afterlife”<sup>31</sup> – the post-performance experience - of the production, it is the performers in *Boomtown* rather than the audience of *Boomtown* per se that need to be considered. Consideration of the cultural void left after the production raised concerns for one partner, Dianna:

When it is all finished [I wonder] if we’re all sitting around and going ‘now what are we going to do? Now what?’ [...] Like a post-natal kind of feeling [...] [especially] when it has been such a big part of the fabric for such a long time. [We have been] living and breathing *Boomtown*. [...] That does worry me a little bit, what happens after, and how can we make sure these people [...] don’t sort of fall sad because it’s suddenly gone.

While there was evidence of some healthy scepticism as to the lasting impacts of this major community event, Cale anticipated the legacy of the event will live on in the fond memories and conversations in the community for generations to come. Whether these legacies will be maintained by historical public accounts or further collective expressions in shared socio-cultural spaces was uncertain. Further stimulus and action will be required to maintain the cultural injection that *Boomtown* created and to continue the movement towards deeper conversations. Through analogy Cindi read the situation clearly:

We had these farmers come and cultivate this highly fertile field, and even though the crop has been harvested, the soil is still fertile waiting for the next crop.

Whether *Boomtown* represents a beginning for cultural projects in Gladstone, or was a one-off event is undetermined. It did, however, activate Kurt Heidecker, the CEO of Gladstone Industry Leadership Group to initiate community reflection in the local newspaper on the simultaneous effects of the industry sector on the community:

For me *Boomtown* has been a rare opportunity for us to reflect as a community on our triumphs and tribulations and individually consider some uncomfortable questions. What

future do we want for our community? What is Gladstone's identity? What is industry's role in our community?<sup>32</sup>

In this case, *Boomtown* stimulated the beginnings of an honest conversation and healthy questions. Perhaps the Gladstone community can continue story-making to reinforce, reinterpret or reinvent their social norms, roles, practices and expectations, and build cohesion across the diversity of opinions that make up the unique social and economic fabric of Gladstone.<sup>33</sup>

*Boomtown* clearly demonstrated that the cultural performance sphere offers a platform to deeply and meaningfully engage community members to participate. *Boomtown* exposed hidden issues in the community, gave voice to thoughts, feelings and concerns, respected differing point of views and as a result triggered honest conversation within the community. Skilful, democratic, community engaged practice does not discriminate; it readily includes willing community members in activities to authentically represent a broad section of the community. CEA practitioners that present opportunities to community members with receptivity, exchange the vision of the project with flexibility, and who adjust to accommodate the community, are vital in supporting the life skills required in democracy. As *Boomtown* and the Gladstone community have exemplified, citizens require a platform through which to engage in meaningful dialogue. The cultural field has a critical role to play in providing the grounds for a community crop that yields a fertile conversation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 2011) xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Author one conducted all the interviews.

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Delanty, *Community* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Delanty, *Community* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 16.

<sup>5</sup> Gerard Delanty, *Community* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 153.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Mulligan et al, 'Creating Community: Celebrations, Arts and Wellbeing Within and Across Local Communities' (Melbourne: The Global Institute, 2006) 18-22. Online:

[www.creativecity.ca/database/files/library/creating\\_community.pdf](http://www.creativecity.ca/database/files/library/creating_community.pdf)

---

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *"What is Literature?" and other essays* (United States of America: the President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Jim Cavaye, 'Governance and Community Engagement: The Australian Experience', in W. Robert Lovan, Michael Murray and Ron Shaffer, ed., *Participatory Governance: Planning, Conflict Management and Public Decision Making in Civil Society* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate Publishing, 2004): 85-102.

<sup>9</sup> Jade Herriman, 'Local Government and Community Engagement in Australia. Working Paper No. 5' (*Australia Centre of Excellence for Local Government, University of Technology Sydney*, November 2011). Online: <http://www.ancelg.org.au/news/local-government-and-community-engagement-australia-working-paper>

<sup>10</sup> Simon Springer, 'Public Space as Emancipation: Meditations on Anarchism, Radical Democracy, Neoliberalism and Violence', *Antipode* 43:2 (2011): 530.

<sup>11</sup> Rodney Smith, Ariadne Vromen, and Ian Cook, *Keywords in Australian Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 52, 57-58.

<sup>12</sup> Julieanna Hilbers, 'The challenges and opportunities of community celebrations that value diversity and foster unity: Beyond "spaghetti and polka"', *Journal of Arts & Communities* 3:1 (2012): 23-37.

<sup>13</sup> Heather Davis cited in Mindy Kay Johnston, 'Music and conflict resolution: Exploring the utilization of music in community engagement' (Master Thesis, Portland State University, 2010) 37-38. Online: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/737556799?accountid=13380>

<sup>14</sup> Beverly Naidus, *Arts for Change: Teaching Outside the Frame* (Oakland, CA: New Village Press) 17.

<sup>15</sup> Sandy Kirby, 'An Historical Perspective on the Community Arts Movement', in Vivienne Binns, ed., *Community and the Arts: history, theory, practice* (Marrickville: Southwood Press, 1991): 19-30.

<sup>16</sup> Sandy Kirby, 'An Historical Perspective on the Community Arts Movement', in Vivienne Binns, ed., *Community and the Arts: history, theory, practice* (Marrickville: Southwood Press, 1991) 19-30.

<sup>17</sup> Australia Council for the Arts, 'Guiding Principles for Community Partnerships', *Community Partnerships Committee, Australia Council for the Arts*, 2011. Web. 18 April 2013. Online: [www.australiacouncil.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0012/78897/Guiding\\_Principles\\_for\\_Community\\_Partnerships\\_2011.pdf](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/78897/Guiding_Principles_for_Community_Partnerships_2011.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Paul Brown, "'Aftershocks'" Verbatim Theatre about the 1989 Newcastle Earthquake: A Work in Progress', *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal* 13:1 (1991): 49-55; Paul Brown, 'Aftershocks: Local Stories, National Culture', *Meanjin* 54:3 (1995): 449-460.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> David Watt, 'Local Knowledges, Memories, and Community: from Oral History to performance', in Susan C. Hadeicke, Deirdre Heddon, Avraham Oz, and E.J. Westlake ed., *Themes in Theatre - Collective Approaches to Theatre and Performance., Volume 4 : Political Performances : Theory and Practice* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009): 189-212.

<sup>21</sup> Mike Foster, 'Community/Communitas: Renegotiating community theatre today. An interview with Graham Pitts', *Australasian Drama Studies* 36:1 (2000): 67-68.

<sup>22</sup> Mike Foster, 'Community/Communitas: Renegotiating community theatre today. An interview with Graham Pitts', *Australasian Drama Studies* 36:1 (2000): 67-68.

<sup>23</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012, *Regional Population Growth, Australia*, 'Table 3. Estimated Resident Population, Local Government Areas, Queensland', time series spreadsheet, cat. no. 3218.0, viewed 5 September 2013. Online: [www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3218.02010-11?OpenDocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3218.02010-11?OpenDocument)

---

<sup>24</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002 ):11

<sup>25</sup> Gareth White, (2013) *Audience Participation in the Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 40-41.

<sup>26</sup> See Caroline Heim, 'Tutorial facilitation in the humanities based on the tenets of Carl Rogers', *Higher Education* 61.1 (2011): 293.

<sup>27</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Random House, 1959) 15

<sup>28</sup> Dolan's utopian performatives are "profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2005): 5.

<sup>29</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 2011) xxii.

<sup>30</sup> Arlene Goldbard, *New creative community: the art of cultural development* (Oakland: New Village Press, 2006): 146

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Reason, 'Asking the audience: audience research and the experience of theatre.' (*About Performance*, Issue 10, 2010): 25. Online: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/821047619?accountid=13380>

<sup>32</sup> Kurt Heidecker, 'Boomtown, an opportunity for community reflection', *Gladstone Industry Leadership Group*, 26 July 2013. Web. 3 August 2013. Online: <http://gilg.com.au/article/boomtown-an-opportunity-for-community-reflection>

<sup>33</sup> Julieanna Hilbers, 'The challenges and opportunities of community celebrations that value diversity and foster unity: Beyond "spaghetti and polka"', *Journal of Arts & Communities* 3:1 (2012): 33.